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Is it Possible to Tie Down a Universal Museum Definition?

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Is it Possible to Tie Down a Universal Museum Definition?

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Abstract

Museums are known worldwide and even though they are a Western construct, similar facilities can be found everywhere. There is a cachet to having a museum in one's community where it becomes a source of collective pride. Nevertheless, museums serve not one, but many communities and the question is whether that fact can be encapsulated in a definition which reflects the total community ethos and the many voices of its stakeholders. Minority and indigenous populations in particular are demanding their voices be heard and this has posed a problem for the creation of a museum definition. In the end, an inclusive, meaningful definition may not be readily found.

Keywords: museums, definitions**,** communities, appropriation, inclusive, universal, elusive

Résumé

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On connait les musées à travers le monde et bien que leur concept soit d'origine occidentale, on retrouve des établissements semblables partout. Avoir un musée au sein d'une collectivité donne un certain prestige et est une source de fierté. Cependant, les musées sont au service non pas d'une seule collectivité mais de plusieurs communautés et la question est de savoir si l'on peut incorporer dans une seule définition du musée le reflet de toutes les cultures communautaires et de toutes les voix des parties concernées. Les minorités et les populations indigènes en particulier exigent que leurs voix soient entendues et cela continue à poser un problème pour élaborer une définition du musée. En fin de compte, il reste ardu de trouver une définition universelle et pertinente, laquelle semble insaisissable.

Mots clés : Musées, Définitions, Communautés, appropriation, inclusif, insaisissable

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Prologue

For those in the field, defining the museum has been a popular activity for decades. Why is this the case? What is the purpose of such activity? For whom or for which entity is this necessary? Do museum "insiders" feel this is so important that their future in this realm is determined by achieving such a goal? Are they so unsure of what they are doing that they have to seek validation by such means? Is there an essential need to lay bare their ongoing *raison d'être* through this activity? Or do they just wish to communicate what they believe they really are?

Museums are a Western construct which, as they currently exist, evolved in the late Renaissance (16th century) from those "cabinets of curiosities" which the gentry kept to show off to and impress their friends and acquaintances or to enliven their social gatherings. The museum concept and edifice then grew out of these humble beginnings and began to evolve in the 18th and 19th centuries to what we see today. Beginning in the last half of the 20th century in particular, museums, along with the notion "museum", have been dissected, analysed, pondered, and subjected to continuous, almost obsessive scrutiny from within the museum community. During this time, the "science" of museology was developed and a "new museology" advanced. The latter aimed to steer museums away from their focus on methodology ("old museology"

and possibly heading in the direction of museum obsolescence?) towards one of purpose (Vergo, 1989, p. 3). Further, such longstanding concerns as the "social relevance of museum exhibits, deconstruction critiques, critiques of ethnocentric primitivism", along with issues of authenticity and the "politically-charged implications of museums exhibits in contemporary society" (González et al, 2001, p. 107) are included in the "new museology" debate. Also included is the transformation of the museum as a "site of worship and awe to one of discourse and critical reflection" committed to "examining unsettling histories, with sensitivity to all parties" where the museum is "transparent in its decision-making and willing to share power" (Marstine, 2006, p. 5).

Much has been written about museums – how they are structured and what their function is, how they should perform and what their role in society should be, how they need to change and reinvent themselves in concert with the times, how to be *au courant* with world dynamics and circumstances, and so on. In addition, Codes of Ethics and "how to" manuals have been prepared to guide museums on the "correct" path forward. Individual museums have identified and made public their mission statements with attending goals and objectives.

As time has advanced, the museum is now expected to become more outward looking than inward facing, more value driven than object driven. Perhaps this is as an advancement from the internal workings of the "museum method", which might now be considered to be solidly in place, to an extension beyond its walls and into the realm of multi-layered interactions where the museum believes it could have an influence in the wider world, not only at the societal level, but also on the economic and political stages. Consequently, museums find themselves in a chronic state of self-examination. Does this mean they do not know what they really are or are they still trying to find their niche of comfort and relevance?

Mise-en-scène

In its most basic sense, a museum is a place where objects of importance, beauty, relevance, intrinsic value, and so forth are deemed to be worthy of acquisition, care, study and public display, and a place where visitors are able to see artifacts or specimens selected for their illustrative significance whether within a thematic framework or as stand-alone examples attesting to their innate uniqueness, visual power, or by a range of other criteria. The museum believes its exhibition offerings will not only attract the visual attention of its visitors, but also convey, through accompanying texts, labels, and other forms of "mixed media", relevant data not only of an informative, but also of an educative nature. In this way, the museum also holds that it is a place where visitors can learn about themselves.

Whatever the museum does in carrying out its "prime directive" and fulfilling whatever it believes society's expectations are for achieving its purpose, whether based on scholarship or as entertainment, the rules for the "museum method"

and parameters of responsibility originate firmly from within the museum itself. In this way, museums can exercise complete control over their pre-determined path and their product. Thus, based on such internally constructed parameters, any person, group, jurisdiction outside of the immediacy of the museum-centric ethos, is viewed as external to its focus and all too often dismissed out of hand. Even if, from time to time, museums venture forth and solicit input from outside of their inherent control, such forays can be few and far between. In other words, the museum is an operational-centric law unto itself and while it welcomes visitors to its exhibition halls and education programmes, it tightly maintains its position of authority in all that it does and plans to do.

At this point, it could be argued that the museum, being in full control of its faculties, is self-sufficient and not in want of any intrusion in its set path of operation. The way forward is secure, and the institutional sights are firmly fixed on the objective. In this way, defining "museum" would seem to be a relatively simple matter and may be seen as universally applicable as well. Even so, beginning in the latter half of the 20th century and continuing into the 21st, museums have changed and these changes and the hints of or paths towards change yet to come are causing a new introspection of not only what a museum is, but also what it should or could become.

Scenario

Caught in a web of attempting to define the museum so that it can be understood and accepted by all to whom it applies, the challenge is to identify not only the players in this process, but also the recipients of the final determination. With the museum being a "Western" construct and having its most populous roots in European society, it may be difficult for those living outside of this catchment to fully comprehend and accept what originates under a Eurocentric banner. Although countries which were once heavily colonized by Europeans may well be accepting of a European status quo, this does not nor should not constitute a universal carte blanche.

To think that a museum is a museum in a universal sense is to negate the societal and cultural milieus in which it is located and for which it has concomitant responsibilities. In this sense, should the starting point be not only from the perspective of those the museum serves (the societal demographic), but also in concert with those in that part of the population who have a legitimate and vested interest in what the museum houses and in its various interpretive programmes (the politics of representation)? Might the whole notion of "museum" need a serious rethink and subsequent actions for realignment undertaken?

The "traditional" museum is normally perceived as a finite structure in which there are collections deemed to have been worthy of acquisition, in keeping with its inherent policy, and where they are stored, conserved, researched, and displayed and to which any person has access. Visitors to the museum

are there primarily to see what is inside – the collections the museum holds or a specific exhibition – or just to visit the gift shop or to have coffee in the cafeteria. They may also be there to attend a museum organized event – a programme, lecture, tour, demonstration – whatever the museum has orchestrated for public consumption. Museums are also on the list of "must sees" for tourists and the world's premier institutions attract millions of visitors each year – so many, in fact, that they are very cognizant of the "visitor numbers" game played by their counterparts the world over. This has become a source of both pride and bragging rights for many museums and is one of the primary objectives of museum policy, often to the detriment of other activities which museums perhaps ought to consider pursuing. Nevertheless, an emphasis on visitor attraction for the income which museums need to pay staff, care for the collections, present exhibitions and undertake programmes, will always be a priority, regardless of the fact that most rely on grants and funding from alternative sources that are primarily government based. There are also museums funded by corporations and private individuals, thus placing them in a questionable situation in respect of the requisite "not-for-profit" status. In fact, are museums being pushed to become "money machines"? With altruism not in the vocabulary of the museum lexicon, the focus can easily turn to one of competition and predation.

An email, dated 15 May 2020, addressed to members of the Canadian Museums Association, gave the 2019 results of a study undertaken by Oxford Economics which was commissioned by the Ottawa Declaration Working Group, a consortium of stakeholders co-led by the Canadian Museums Association, and Library and Archives Canada, which focused on the economic benefits of non-profit galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAMs). The study found that Canada gains a net profit of almost 8.6 billion dollars per annum in economic benefits from the GLAM sector as it "feeds the economy and innovation, and forms an integral part of the fabric of our nation, benefitting Canadians of all ages, backgrounds and regions." It further concludes that GLAM visits "are associated with a number of other important societal benefits including greater literacy, curiosity, innovation, knowledge and creativity, and a better sense of community."

Staying with economic issues, museums also have a discernible effect on the marketplace in that they, primarily through the display of specially chosen objects, set standards of what is valuable and worthy of collection. Acquiring something perceived to be of "museum quality" for a special place in one's home is, interestingly, a throwback to the days of those private "cabinets of curiosity". Nevertheless, mini museums are well entrenched in many homes of the wealthier members of society. In addition, museums themselves are often predatory in the marketplace when engaging in collections acquisition in an arena of competing wants for scarce resources, especially where supply is low and demand high. The prices which museums pay for such acquisitions contribute to and often set the benchmark for the sale of similar objects in

the future. In this way, in fact, museums are often major players not only in setting standards of excellence, but also in effecting the economic dynamics in that marketplace. This goes for a whole raft of objects, from antiquities, to historic treasures, to fine arts, to riches from exotic lands, to archaeological and ethnological material culture. While many objects are acquired legitimately, forays into the marketplace in some instances may be questionable unless museums undertake their due diligence regarding the legitimacy of acquisition and the attending ethics governing the transactions.

On closer examination, museums come in many different forms ranging from the "traditional" museum described above, whether it be a large, all-encompassing institution having national stature, to a small, community-based facility often located within or under the aegis of another larger entity (such as a community centre) to which it is administratively linked. There are ecomuseums which physically encompass entire communities; neighbourhood museums; tiny museums tucked in the back rooms of civic buildings, businesses or shops; historic, palatial and religious buildings and sites; open air museums; travelling museums; cyber or virtual museums; special spaces such as "keeping places" deemed by locals to be "museums"; and even field labs which are often considered as being in the category of "museum". Private museums are springing up which showcase the collections of the very wealthy and which are open to the public. Into this mix, the American Alliance of Museums (formerly the American Association of Museums) also includes botanical gardens, zoological parks, aquaria, planetaria, battlefields, and cultural heritage centres. In addition, there are even "museums", such as the Arizona Museum for Youth (now called the i.d.e.a. Museum), which have no collections of their own and create temporary exhibitions using works of art borrowed from established institutions (Watkins, 1994, p. 28). Still, I am certain that there are other places and functions or experiences professing to be "museum" which have been left out of this list. Nevertheless, this comprises an incredibly wide range of "museumness" and it is certain that both the term and concept "museum" has a cachet which most everyone agrees is both recognizable and has a level of publically perceived importance.

Consequently, being able to define all museums under one meaningful umbrella poses a huge logistical problem and doing so would undoubtedly negate the community-ness of most, along with the attending pride any community may have in its museum. Museum definitions generate a strange dialectic and are very much based on achieving a means to an end which is couched in language to meet standards set by institutions and organizations of the "higher echelon" and not by each community. This then sets up a dichotomy where each entity can gauge whether it is "in" or "out" of the "legitimate" museum sphere and therefore whether it has the "right" to call itself "museum". Community ethos is a valued commodity for its residents and to be told that its museum does not fit the prescribed definition, thus rendering it therefore a "non-museum",

would be socially and emotionally injurious not only to the community's identity and pride, but also to the national good.

Nevertheless, "official" museum definitions emanate from the heart of the "Western construct" and therein lies the issue at hand. They are not "universal" in their intent and, in fact, they never can be. Who is to say what is or is not a "museum"? Policy makers and definition builders need to know that there are peoples who live in the world in whose languages the word "museum" does not exist. This even includes peoples who live in colonized countries such as Canada and the United States and who themselves may have museums or museum-like collections on their indigenous reserves. Although almost all these peoples now speak English, the lexicon of which contains the word "museum", their native tongues do not. Even while indigenous languages are fading from memory as the number of native speakers decreases rapidly, there are many concerted and urgent efforts being made to preserve those languages under threat of extinction. Perhaps even new terms might be added that may give reference to something "museum-like", but the perception of what indigenous peoples perceive as "museum" may, in fact, be something entirely different. Does this make it even less valid and thus not worthy of inclusion?

This is an important element as museums have appropriated material culture from nearly all indigenous peoples worldwide and such objects have contributed extensively to the status that reputable museums enjoy today. Not only have such treasured and valuable "spoils" graced the exhibition halls of museum establishments, but also museums were complicit in the 19th and early 20th century "human zoo" displays which represented a growing public curiosity in so-called "primitive cultures", the tragic story of Ishi being one case in point (Clifford, 2013, pp. 91–191). Nevertheless, curiosity in this sphere has not abated, as evidenced throughout the Karp and Lavine 1991 publication *Exhibiting Cultures* and referenced by Desmond in Part I of her study *Staging Tourism* (1999, pp. 2–141). Perhaps the colonialistic perception of "them out there" has clouded the issue to the extent that such peoples are at best either marginalized or, at worst, forgotten completely. Unsurprisingly, these same peoples do not see the museum in a positive light but rather as that entity responsible for stealing their cultural objects for its own benefit. Now, in an age in which these peoples are feeling closer to their indigenous roots and are beginning to lay claim to the physical manifestations of their culture through the growing repatriation movement, this past will dog the museum and its often professed right of "ownership". This situation has cast a negative pall on the relationship between those museums holding such materials and the descendants of the original owners. For the latter, their perception of the museum, from the "outside looking in", remains a negative one.

This is not to say that no steps have been taken to try to address the imbalance. In Canada, for example, the 1992 *Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples: Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples,* sponsored by the Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums

Association, specifically recommends that partnerships be established between First Nations and museums in such areas as interpretation, access, repatriation, training and implementation. Despite its best intentions, the Report became a shelved document as funding to effect implementation was not forthcoming from the Canadian Government. Nevertheless, museums could accept it "in spirit". On the other hand, the course followed in the United States was in the form of national legislation whereby in 1990, a federal law known as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was enacted requiring federally funded institutions housing collections originating from Native American and Native Hawaiian peoples "to inventory their holdings of human remains, funerary and sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony", and to consult "with the relevant Aboriginal groups and organizations all aimed at reaching agreements on the repatriation or alternative disposition of these materials" (Maranda, 2015, p. 155).

While these steps are all well and good as far as they go, they do not address the plethora of museum holdings that originate from those outside of their country's indigenous populations, whose voices are being raised from afar. Museums located in the same regions where indigenous populations live are endeavouring to be responsive to these peoples' concerns, but the issue of stewardship still gives way to ownership and is left wanting. The question here is: what is happening in museums in countries where there are no extant indigenous populations? How are these museums dealing with either their colonial past or their past collecting regimens? This is an important issue due to the fact that the concept of "museum" varies widely, and since indigenous collections and their source communities and peoples worldwide are increasingly gaining attention in the "museum sphere", there are voices other than those of museum insiders that need to be heard and considered. Many of these concerns can also be extended to museums holding materials originating from other minority groups, including those who have immigrated from their countries of origin.

As museums proliferate, real inclusivity still appears as remote and elusive as ever. As for the definition of the museum, there are just too many voices out there for any text to be either inclusive or effective. While lip service may be offered, the only proof would be not just in a show of museum sincerity but in real and substantive museum action with measurable outcomes. Wherever extant museums of whatever ilk or size may be, it is the community that will determine its relationship to those entities. A definition will not.

Nevertheless, it is deemed essential that a definition there must be, but where to start and on what to base it? Might just reiterating the basic functions of a museum suffice, since going into further detail referencing its societal relationships, especially those outside of its walls, is where the process goes off the rails, becomes controversial, and results in creating camps of inclusion and exclusion? If the "definition makers" keep it simple, then the "community" can apply it to whatever it accepts as "museum". This would promote a more "bottom up" rather than a "top down" view of the museum and its place in the world.

There is a long history of scholars, museologists, thinkers, lay-persons, and so forth who have had ideas of what a museum is or should be. In 1917, archaeologist Harlan I. Smith, then working for the Geological Survey of Canada, concluded that if "the museum ... does not rise to the occasion and at least adjust itself to meet war needs" and by so doing, aid "the general progress of the world" then other organizations "will take over what should be the most important part of museum activities" (Smith, 1917, p. 430). Burcaw (1983, p. 12) lists numerous definitions of "museum", including one from UNESCO which states that museums "of whatever kind all have the same task – to study, preserve, and exhibit objects of cultural value for the good of the community as a whole". Marstine observes that "the notion of museum holds diverse and contradictory meanings" and that "the metaphors of museum as shrine, market-driven industry, colonizing space and post-museum" are those most commonly heard (2006, pp. 8–9).

An anthropologist offers his definition of museum as an "institution in which social relationships are oriented in terms of a collection of objects which are made meaningful by those relationships – though these objects are often understood by museum natives to be meaningful independently of those social relationships" (Handler, 1993, p. 33). In 1984, Joseph Coates, an American futurist, predicted that by 2010, museums "will include minority points of view and different cultural perspectives" and that "museums will shed their elitist associations as they integrate themselves more fully into the mainstream of American culture" (1984, p. 45).

Tomislav Šola describes the ecomuseum as an "institutionalized form of cultural action in the preservation of our heritage [which] transcends the bounds of official definitions" and that it is "a museum organized according to its own needs – a museum which is less a fact and more a process, less an institution and more both action and reaction" (1987, p. 48). Still on this subject, André Desvallées sees the ecomuseum as a place where "heritage has radically been substituted to that of collections" and while "collections are not the first aim of the museum" it is even the case where "the museum is out of its walls and everything belongs to it" (1982, p. 8). The ecomuseum is also described as a "museal institution which, for the development of a community, combines conservation, display and explanation of the cultural and natural heritage held by this same community" (Desvallées & Mairesse, 2010, p. 59).

More recently, "museum" has been examined and re-examined in several publications from the International Council of Museums International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM). These include Mairessse and Desvallées (2007), Davis, Mairessse and Desvallées (2010), Mairesse et al (2017), and Soares, Brown and Nazor (2018). In the end, Duncan Cameron observes that attempts "to define museum have been made for almost as long as there have been museums" and concludes that as "yet there is no definition to my knowledge that meets with everyone's satisfaction" (1972, p. 63). To this, Bernice Murphy adds: "The definition should be clear to the mind but also nudge the human heart" (2004, p. 6).

Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft

Borrowing loosely from these two concepts first introduced in the 19th century by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies and later "remodelled" by fellow German sociologist, Max Weber, the attending precepts could be useful in delineating a museum definition. Tönnies contrasted two types of society, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* ("communal society") "is a society in which people feel they belong together because they are of the same kind" (Broom & Selznick, 1958, p. 35). In other words, "they are kin and cannot freely renounce their membership, for it involves great emotional meaning for the group as well as for the individual" (ibid, p. 35). *Gemeinschaft* is also found to include such elements as custom and tradition. This was contrasted with *Gesellschaft* ("associational society") in which "the major social bonds are voluntary and based upon the rational pursuit of self-interest". This is a type where "people enter relations with one another, not because they 'must' or because it is 'natural', but as a practical way of achieving an objective" (ibid, p. 35). It should also be noted that the "long historical trend has moved toward *Gesellschaft* with more and more activities governed by the voluntary action of freely contracting individuals" (ibid, p. 35).

Both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* can be referred to as "positive types of social relationships, that is, modes in which individuals are bound together", but that the "keynote of *Gesellschaft* is the rational pursuit of individual self-interest" and to these Weber introduced *Kampf* (conflict) as a third "basic relationship element" (Parsons, 1968, p. 687). Further, a characteristic of *Gesellschaft* is "a fusion of interests over a specific, positively defined area" within which it involves "a 'compromise' of interests of the parties" but which "only mitigates their deeper-lying separateness, which in essentials remains untouched" (ibid, p. 688). Nevertheless, "there remains a latent conflict which is only patched up by compromise" (ibid, p. 688).

Breaking this down in terms of the current study, the "insiders" of the museum structure and function, that is, the professional museum community of like thought could be equated to a *Gesellschaft* society, and that of the "outsiders" who have a culturally vested personal or community-based interest in the museum and its collections – what is done with them and how they are interpreted – as *Gemeinschaft*. Further, while the development of a museum definition could be categorized as an element falling under *Gesellschaft*, it may not be achieved without a good measure of *Kampf*, thus pitting *Gesellschaft* against *Gemeinschaft*.

The differentiation between these two types of society is, on the one hand, *Gesellschaft,* which is likened to the established museum and the expectations and trappings that go with its adherence to the meaning of the definition ascribed to it; and on the other side, *Gemeinschaft,* which represents the community, its peoples, their ingrained life and ethos, and is recognizable by that community and what is important to it. There are, in fact, two separate "communities" here – the *museum* community as functioning entity and the

human community, which is either the site of the museum or is seen to be represented by the museum. While the latter is normally referenced only in the singular (community), it needs to be referred to in the plural (communities) because a museum represents, is answerable to and affects not one but many communities in its catchment and sphere of influence. This applies not only to "western" but also to minority populations, whether they be resident immigrant or indigenous peoples or those who live elsewhere but whose material culture resides in foreign museum facilities.

It has been evident for far too long that the demographic with which the museum is most concerned is that of the majority population in which it is situated and that segment with which it is perceived to be most accommodating is described as the "elite". Even though museums spend an inordinate amount of energy trying to woo the public at large, most are concerned with making themselves open and primarily presentable to the societal sector they feel will visit and support their establishment and its programmes. Not everyone is a museumgoer, and, in fact, it is certain that there are those who fear visiting such a place even though museums often "dumb down" to try to attract the non-goers and the "under caste". In doing so, museums are aware of their intimidating side and while outreach initiatives have had some measure of success, there remains a huge gulf especially between museums and indigenous populations.

Turning to indigenous and non-western populations, whether they live in "developed" or "developing" countries, and considering the fact that for many much of their culture has been appropriated away from their own communities to end up in museums, their "voice" has been ignored by the very organization that believes it is being democratic, inclusive and socially responsible. Take for example, the spontaneous remarks aired by museologist Amareswar Galla in the course of a lecture at the 1992 triennial meeting of the Commonwealth Association of Museums regarding an Australian aboriginal band that was "successful in obtaining a government grant to build a museum for its sacred objects" but when "the inspector came to see the result, he was shown a small plain building with no windows and one door which was locked", and when he asked, "What kind of museum is this?" he was told, "This is the keeping place and this is the way it is supposed to be" (Cameron, 1993b, pp. 9–10).

Cameron, in another paper, suggests that the "new museum-like institutions in non-European societies … must find new forms and new functions" and that they "must grow out of the rich humus of their own cultural soil, reflecting the indigenous mythos" (1993a, p. 167). But, perhaps the most telling and uncomplimentary juxtaposition of the museum "myth" with the "realities" came from the collective opinions of a mix of Maori and European university graduate museum studies students in New Zealand as follows (Cameron, 1996, pp. 12–13):

MYTH	REALITIES
Museums serve society	Museums serve the elite
Museums are a Window on the World	the Window is only a mirror of the museum itself
Museums are a representative sample of world realities	Museums are a biased Eurocentric collection of bits and pieces
Museums preserve the whole world's heritage	Museums plunder the world, stealing the heritage of others
Museums create new knowledge	Museums store old knowledge
Museums give public education	Museums indoctrinate and spread propaganda
Museums teach about other peoples and their cultures	Museums are ethnocentric and use stolen culture to teach cultural superiority

For many indigenous peoples, decolonization of the museum ethos is at the crux of the issue. Lonetree (2012, pp. 168–175) concludes that transforming museums into places that matter for indigenous peoples means that decolonization requires:

- telling hard truths
- engaging a collaborative methodology
- transforming sites of oppression to places that matter
- sharing indigenous knowledge

In a different circumstance, Bruno Brulon Soares makes reference to the favelas in Brazilian cities, some of which are "using the label 'museum' to implement a resistance device and to reclaim cultural and social rights" (2018, p. 164). In fact, the museum has become "a political instrument for the invisible local groups to become political agents, existing socially through the museum agency" and in this way, "it allows them to address the Brazilian State and the local governmental institutions" (ibid, p. 164).

Epilogue

By museumifying other cultures, museums are not only asserting their control and superiority, but also disregarding the essence of what it means to be a member of a minority population and one without a critical mass or voice for

representation. Until museums can come to grips with how they are perceived by those communities from which they have purloined many of their treasures, it will be impossible to design a "museum" definition that will ever have anything close to either a universal comprehension or a universal acceptance.

Nevertheless, there is no reason why *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* cannot have a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship, but whether such can be couched and encapsulated or even reflected in a definition, is, at the least, moot. To date, definitions of "museum" have been perceived as partisan in nature and in no way akin to plural experiences or even more than one ultimate reality. Lost in the realm of ideas in a temporal world that constantly shifts and changes, it would be almost impossible to reflect all communities, all peoples, all cultures, all beliefs in such a process. Subtle exploitation, scientific racism and an ethos of superiority aside, in ICOM's May 2020 E-Newsletter, the words "Museums are more trusted than governments and newspapers" have an uneasy ring and should be a cause for concern.

In advance of the "new" museum definition that made its appearance in 2019, ICOM's periodical *Museum International* produced a special issue entitled: "The Museum Definition, the Backbone of Museums" (Vol.71, No. 281–282, 2019), which is full of human and societal-based issues that are people and community oriented and far removed from any concept of a fully comprehensive definition. This being the case, it is evident that an inclusive, universally meaningful definition is as elusive as ever.

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